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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000688

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON
FOR REASON 1.4 (b)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) This press freedom update comes in the wake President Chavez' plans to "deepen" his revolution and implement "21st century socialism" despite increasing international scrutiny. Within this context, the BRV continues its attacks against independent media outlets. We expect Chavez to continue employing a variety of mechanisms - legal, economic, regulatory, judicial and rhetorical - to harass the private media, aggravating the already hostile BRV attitude towards the free press. Topics addressed in this update include:

-- "Tal Cual" Pays Fine
-- Is "Ultimas Noticias" Next?
-- Press Society Condemns BRV
-- RCTV Update
-- Changes to "Alo, Presidente"

END SUMMARY.

"Tal Cual" Pays Fine

¶2. (SBU) Opposition daily "Tal Cual" paid a court-mandated USD 75,000 fine on February 22 and stated that it will appeal the court's decision. A judge levied charges against owner (and Chavez critic) Teodoro Petkoff and humorist Laurencio Marquez for "violating the rights of children" after publishing a satirical article that referenced Chavez' daughter. In the days following the court's ruling, "Tal Cual" organized a collection drive to raise the funds necessary to pay the hefty fine. "Tal Cual" was able to raise a significant portion of the fine, in part, because it drew on resources not available to smaller media outlets. Petkoff's image as an outspoken opposition figure, "Tal Cual's" ability to keep the charges in the public eye over an extended period of time, and the daily's national readership all contributed to the successful fundraising. Nevertheless, the drawn-out ordeal caused hardship as the newspaper expended money and time to defend its editorial integrity. "Tal Cual's" experience has not been lost on other media

outlets, which now consider it an object lesson in BRV harassment of a relatively small media outlet.

Threats against "Ultimas Noticias": Are they Next?

13. (SBU) Minister of Popular Power for the Economy Pedro Morejon sent a letter to "Ultimas Noticias" director Eleazar Diaz and journalist Luz Mely Reyes March 29 threatening to file criminal charges against them if they continued to publish their series of reports on corruption cases involving BRV and Iranian officials. Morejon's letter states that the daily newspaper's allegations are punishable by law and form part of a "national or international conspiracy" against the BRV. Morejon's letter is an inappropriate and possibly illegal pressure on a media outlet for investigating possible corruption scheme. According, to local media sources this is the first time a BRV official has sent a written threat to a media outlet, as most such threats are usually verbal.

Press Society: BRV Violates Freedom of Expression

14. (SBU) At an Inter-American Press Society (SIP) conference in Colombia, SIP President Rafael Molina accused the BRV on March 18 of exercising a "deliberate campaign" against freedom of expression. Molina called attention to the increased number of threats and violence directed against journalists and the BRV's continued harassment of independent media outlets. He specifically mentioned the BRV's decision to revoke the broadcast license of major opposition television outlet Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) on May 27, despite RCTV's claim that its license expires June 12, 2022. According to Molina, President Chavez and BRV officials refused SIP's invitation to discuss the state of the media in

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Venezuela on three separate occasions.

15. (SBU) Minister of Popular Power for Communications (MPPC) William Lara accused SIP members March 16 of taking part in the events surrounding the coup of April 2002, and demanded "an apology" for the SIP's "attempts to destabilize Venezuelan democracy." In typical BRV fashion, Lara anticipated the SIP's negative findings and condemned them before the conference even commenced.

RCTV Update

16. (SBU) RCTV supporters and anti-government groups stepped up their efforts to raise public awareness of the outlet's imminent closure, while the BRV hardened its position. During the reporting period, opposition political party Primera Justicia (PJ) organized a signature drive, RCTV employees and family members held a small vigil in downtown Caracas, while members of the opposition National Resistance Movement met with Chris Sabatini of the Council on the Americas in New York to discuss RCTV's case. Opposition political parties COPEI, Accion Democratica, and PJ along with the Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV) announced plans to organize a large march April 21 in support of RCTV. Additionally, more international organizations have criticized the BRV's decision to revoke RCTV's license, including Reporters without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, The International Association of Radio Broadcasting, the Global Committee of Organizations for Press Freedom, and the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, among others.

17. (SBU) RCTV supporters, however, are not the only ones voicing concerns. The pro-government Association of Independent National Producers (Aproni) organized a March 28

demonstration to the station's headquarters to lobby for "quality" programming. Digital photographs taken the following morning show extensive graffiti damage to the station's facade and sidewalk. Some of the more colorful graffiti messages read "RCTV: Assassins," Expropriation, "and "Get off the air." The pro-government demonstrators acted more like a mob than responsible protesters. RCTV employees and supporters participated in clean-up efforts and condemned the acts, calling them "an act of aggression" against the station.

¶8. (SBU) In the meantime, the BRV strengthened its attack against RCTV and presented a new set of charges against the station. Minister of Popular Power for Telecommunications and head of the National Telecommunications Commission (CONATEL) Jesse Chacon announced March 29 that the BRV will follow through on its plans to not renew RCTV's license. Chacon said that as of May 28, RCTV will "simply be shut down" and transformed into a public service station. PAS contacts indicate that the BRV has done little to prepare for the turn over, and it is likely the cable signal will be filled by a pro-government outlet until a new programming format is complete.

¶9. (SBU) Separately, CONATEL announced March 9 that RCTV must pay a USD 700,000 fine for failing to accurately report its gross earnings in 2004. CONATEL claims it plans to file a case with the District Attorney's office to investigate possible tax fraud. These allegations appear to be another attempt by the BRV to discredit RCTV and to divert attention away from the licensing matter.

¶10. (C) Press Officer met recently with the president of La Tele TV station Fernando Freias to discuss RCTV's case who made two interesting points. First, Freias said he is almost 100 percent certain that the BRV will close down RCTV. Second, in the vein of "network cannibalism," it was clear that as much as he regrets what is happening to RCTV, Freias will seize on the opportunity to capture some of the advertising dollars that will become available once RCTV is off the air. Freias commented that economically RCTV has been doing very well, as the oil boom economy has made television advertising a very lucrative business.

Changes to "Alo, Presidente"

¶11. (SBU) President Chavez' weekly Sunday television show "Alo, Presidente" underwent a series of changes in recent

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weeks. In mid-February, the MPPC announced that the show would be broadcast during the work week in 90 minute episodes: a television broadcast on Thursdays and radio broadcasts the other weekdays. By March 18, however, the television show reverted back to Sundays, although it also now includes radio broadcasts on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Education Minister Adan Chavez is also starting a weekly television broadcast to showcase the BRV's "Morality and Enlightenment" ideology campaign.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) As the BRV pushes its "socialist" project forward, we expect its harassment of the free press to continue. It is unlikely that "Tal Cual's" problems with the BRV will dissipate following the newspaper's intention to appeal the charges. BRV officials are also becoming more emboldened in the way they transmit their grievances to media outlets, as is the case with "Ultimas Noticias." The recent fine levied against RCTV for alleged tax evasion not only diverts attention away from a substantive debate of the station's broadcasting license, it also provides the BRV with a second

front in which to attack the station. Freias comments are another example of how even the pretense of media solidarity in Venezuela is fleeting. In response to mounting international criticism, the BRV continues to attempt to portray itself as the victim and gratuitously attacks the credibility of media watchdog organizations. END COMMENT.

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